

'Latin America is absolutely vital to the U.S.'

Rep. Dante B. Fascell on Latin American issues and foreign policy concerns.

Rep. Dante B. Fascell of Florida's 19th District is chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and has been a member of Congress for 30 years. He is the ranking Democrat on foreign affairs in the House of Representatives. In this interview with Washington Times Latin America correspondent Jay Mallin Sr., Mr. Fascell answers questions on Latin American issues and other foreign policy concerns.

Q: Do you see the current Soviet military buildup as a cause for concern?

A: Absolutely. It demonstrates that the Soviets have not slowed down one bit in building their military capability to achieve their political objectives. We have to be concerned from the military and political standpoints.

Q: Do you see any danger of a Soviet thrust toward the Mideast oil fields?

A: I don't know that there is a danger of an imminent move by the Soviets toward the Mideast oilfields, but that is always a danger and a thing that concerns military planners in the West. We have to be on guard against that constantly.

Q: Switching to another part of the world, you represent an area in Florida that is not far from communist Cuba. Do you see Fidel Castro and his regime as a continued threat?

A: Not in a military sense. I don't think anyone in the United States thinks Cuba is prepared militarily to present a threat to the United States, but there is no question that the existence of Cuba as a communist state backed by the Soviet Union is a political and a military problem for all the countries in the hemisphere. And when you add to that the constant export of ideology and support for organizations that are trying to undermine democratic institutions throughout the area, then you have a problem of considerable concern.

Q: Do you feel the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua is a threat to Central American peace?

A: If they carry through on their stated objective, which is to expand the revolution throughout Central America, there is obvious danger, military and political. If they stay within the boundaries of their own country and carry out agreed-upon principles of democratizing their government, they might not be a threat.

Q: What do you think the United States should specifically seek from the Castro regime if there is a move toward better relations with Cuba?

A: There are talks going on now with Cuba. I have not been informed about those talks in any detail, so I have no idea what the administration is doing. But it is clear that in order to achieve any sort of rational relations with the Castro government, we must take into consideration several important factors. One would be the Cuban export of subversion and revolution in the typical communist fashion. That means that [Mr.] Castro would have to stay out of support for governments, parties or groups in Central and Latin American countries that are seeking to overthrow democratic institutions. We have to require the same thing of Cuba in other continents, Africa particularly, because there it is carrying out a role as a surrogate of the Soviet Union.

The Cubans have expanded their international interest all over the place. And in conjunction with [Mr.] Castro's desire to be a leading force in the Third World movement, they are all over the place. Certainly that is something we will have to reach an agreement on before we can go on to other things.

Another thing is the continuous buildup of Cuba itself as a military base for the Soviets. We would have to reach a clear understanding that that is not going to continue or be permitted.

Finally, we would have to consider the human rights issues and the question of properties expropriated by Cuba.

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Q: Turning again to Nicaragua, do you favor U.S. assistance to the Nicaraguan rebels?

A: I voted for it every year the president asked for funding. That includes this year.

Q: Do you believe Congress will continue funding after the U.S. presidential election?

A: The majority of the House has voted several times not to continue the funding. With the request for the supplemental appropriation this year, 1984, the Congress did not pursue it. I think everything came to a dead stop at the mining of the Nicaraguan harbors. It is clear that the Senate did not want to pursue additional funding for the rebels in that bill, and the decision was made by somebody to let the supplemental bill go forward without Nicaraguan money in it. Then the administration announced that it would renew the request at some other time.

Suffice it to say that at the time, it appeared the United States was directly involved in military activity in a foreign country and Congress had not declared war. There was a tremendous reaction regarding the request of the president to get additional funds for the Contras [rebels]. As for myself, I think that once the Contras were established under U.S. support in Nicaragua, it was vital to continue their support. Otherwise there would be a bloodbath, and secondly this would diminish U.S. credibility once we had made that commitment. That's the reason I supported them.

I don't particularly like the idea of a long, extended covert operation that is really not covert. I think that is a mistake. Obviously, this has been an overt operation, and I have no qualms about supporting surrogates anywhere to do whatever needs to be done, but in a sensible way. We provide allies all over the world with military and economic support. I like the idea of putting our politics on top of the table.

I think what got this particular issue in trouble was that it started out as a secret run governed by the CIA. That raised a whole host of questions about whether or not that is the right way to go. Our feeling was that having started down that road, rightly or wrongly, the only thing we could do was to continue to support the Contras, and that's what I voted for.

The money to the Contras is a matter that has been extremely debateable in both parties. Nevertheless the president has received from the House Committee on Foreign Affairs 90 percent of what he asked for — maybe more, I don't know the exact percentage. And for fiscal 1984-85, in terms of money for military and economic assistance for Central America, except for the assistance for the Contras, the committee has given the president every bit of authority that he wanted.

Q: Walter Mondale has called for a U.S. military pullout from Central America. Do you agree with that?

A: I don't support U.S. military involvement in Central America and I don't know anybody who does in the Congress, and I don't know anybody who has requested it. I would not support direct U.S. involvement in Central America that means sending troops.

I have supported sending advisors to El Salvador. I supported military assistance to El Salvador. I supported military assistance to Honduras. I supported the military advisors in Honduras. I supported assistance to the Contras.

Q: What would you change in the present administration's policies on Latin America, particularly Central America? If you were Secretary of State, what changes would you make?

A: I think I would lean on diplomatic efforts to bring an end to these problems. I understand military pressure as well as anyone, and sometimes it is useful. I think, however, that a change in rhetoric would be helpful and I think this administration in the last year or so has made progress in that area. You know the admonition of Teddy Roosevelt is still a pretty good admonition around here: "Speak softly and carry a big stick. And never use the big stick unless you absolutely, positively have to use it."

I think there is a lot in Central America and in Latin America that has to be done, and it has its roots in economic dislocation and inability to have any hope in the future. The exploitation of these issues by the communists is a big issue for us.

But we should not place our total reliance on military pressure or a military posture. A step in the right direction is the Caribbean Initiative by the president, and the Kissinger Report, which the Congress has supported. Congress provided an additional \$1.2 billion, which is the first part of the entire Kissinger package of \$8 billion over a period of five years. We are beginning to address in a more meaningful way the social and economic problems which underlie all the political activity in Central America, and I think we can get ahead on it.

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Q: Would you comment on our military relations with Brazil?

A: We have a special relationship with the Brazilians. They have a large country with considerable military interests of their own in this hemisphere. It is very useful for the United States to maintain that relationship with the Brazilians. The communists have been at work for more than 30 years in Latin America, economically, militarily and through other methods. It is beneficial for the United States to maintain relations with all democratic institutions that have withstood this kind of effort by the communists. This is particularly so in the case of Brazil because of the country's economic capabilities. They have been on the verge of a major economic breakthrough for years. When that happens, it will be very helpful for the United States and Brazil to be the closest of friends.

Q: Would you have any general comment on Latin America?

A: Latin America is absolutely vital to the United States. The nations of the Western Hemisphere are inextricably bound by social, cultural and political relationships. We in the United States have a tremendous responsibility to the other nations, for our own benefit as well as the benefit of the entire free world. The truth of the matter is that the Western Hemisphere can be considered the bulwark of the free world.

I don't mean to demean at all our relationship with Europe, but Latin America is a huge trading partner and Canada is our largest trading partner. Our investments in Latin America, our economic relationships, are absolutely vital to this country. Besides that, the Latin American nations are our next-door neighbors. They are very close to us. We need to do everything we possibly can to nurture and fortify the common bonds of religion, culture and democratic principles that brought all these people to the Western Hemisphere to start with.

And that is from the days of the Monroe Doctrine up to right now. The principles are still the same, espoused in all kinds of doctrines in the OAS and all kinds of treaties. Through every administration, I think, everybody has seen that.

There has been a tendency, I might say, not to focus sufficient national will on the problems in the Western Hemisphere. We hit it starting as far back as the days of Franklin Roosevelt and the Good Neighbor Policy, then under Jack Kennedy with the Alliance for Progress, and now with the Caribbean Initiative.

What we need is a long-range, permanent national commitment to bringing about the economic and social improvements in Latin America that the people are demanding. Otherwise, we will be sitting on volcano that is going to blow up in our faces.